

ISSUE BRIEF

Community Service and Service-Learning in America's Schools



Research shows that when young people participate in service, they are more likely to continue on a pathway of lifelong civic engagement. Research also shows that service-learning, an approach to education that ties community service to classroom instruction and reflection, contributes to students' success and has a positive impact on their social behavior, habits, and attitudes. In an effort to better understand the trends in community service and service-learning, the Corporation surveyed a national sample of over 2,000 K-12 public school principals regarding service in their schools and compared findings to a 1999 study, analyzing changes over time. The research report Community Service and Service-Learning in America's Schools (2008) provides insight into the prevalence of community service and service-learning in public schools as well as the supports and policies in place to sustain and build service-learning programs. The full report, and other research by the Corporation for National and Community Service, can be found at www.nationalservice.gov/research.

KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ Community service in schools has grown since 1999.
 - The percentage of K-12 public school principals reporting that their school offers recognized opportunities for students to serve has grown from 64 percent in 1999 to 68 percent in 2008.
 - High schools are especially likely to recognize community service, with 86 percent of schools doing so, up from 83 percent in 1999.
- ◆ A smaller group of schools offers service-learning, which ties community service to academic instruction and reflection.
 - Less than a quarter (24%) of K-12 public school principals report that their school offers service-learning opportunities. In 1999, nearly a third (32%) of schools offered service-learning activities.
- ◆ Schools that offer service-learning opportunities are committed to it.
 - Of the schools that have service-learning activities today, 96 percent of their principals report that the percentage of students participating has remained the same or has grown over recent years.
- ◆ The “class gap” in service-learning has decreased.
 - In 1999, schools in low-income areas were 36 percent less likely to have service learning activities; in 2008, they were only 26 percent less likely to offer service-learning.
 - Still, only 20 percent of schools in low-income areas currently offer service-learning activities, compared to 27 percent of schools that are not in low-income areas.

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- ◆ **Elementary schools are the least likely to offer service-learning activities.**
 - 20 percent of elementary schools offer service-learning activities, compared to a quarter of middle schools and over a third (35%) of high schools.
 - More than half (51%) of elementary school principals indicate that they do not offer service-learning activities because they believe their students are too young.
- ◆ **Service-learning policies often go unknown.**
 - More than a quarter (28%) of principals do not know whether their district has a policy in support of service-learning.
- ◆ **In many schools, little support is consistently available for service-learning.**
 - The majority (74%) of schools have no full-time or part-time service-learning coordinators to provide technical support.
 - About two thirds of school principals (66%) report that their district does not provide training and/or professional development workshops for service-learning.

IMPLICATIONS

- ◆ Currently, many teachers operate service-learning activities without the assistance of a coordinator and often without technical support of any kind. District- and school-level support for service-learning can encourage schools to integrate these activities into curricula.
- ◆ More research is needed into why some schools give greater priority to service-learning than other schools. By comparing schools that incorporate service-learning into curricula with schools that only provide community service activities, we may be able to better understand the motivating factors for offering service-learning.

- ◆ There is also a need for more research into the impacts of service-learning on students' academic outcomes, particularly if those teachers and administrators who are unfamiliar with service-learning are to adopt service-learning programs.
- ◆ If service-learning is to be viewed as a method of putting young people on a lifelong path of engagement, it is necessary to show that age is not a barrier to active citizenship and that elementary school students also benefit from service-learning.

METHODOLOGY

The sample of 2,002 elementary, middle, and secondary schools was drawn from the Department of Education's 2005-2006 Common Core of Data. Data collection occurred in March and April of 2008. The paper surveys were completed by the school principal or the person most knowledgeable about the service-learning activities in the school, and telephone follow-ups were conducted for non-responses and incomplete or unclear surveys. A total of 1,847 surveys were completed, and an additional 16 schools were found ineligible, for a response rate of 93%. All findings presented have been weighted to produce national estimates.

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